ALIVE, WELL, AND HUMAN
Reflections on the Ministry
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There is nothing in the world I respect more than the faith commitment each of my colleagues in ministry has made, and the way that commitment, that faith response, is expressed vocationally. In fact, I respect it so much that I hesitate to assume that anyone of us knows anything the others don't. However, one time, early in my own ministry I was helped a great deal by a pastor's pastor, Bill Laws (H.R., First Church, Columbus, Indiana, Moderator of General Assembly - 1970) who met with the pastors of my Presbytery in a retreat much like this one. Bill simply shared with us the details of his ministry: his unforgetable phrase was an "ecclesiastical strip tease". I know that I am always enriched to learn about the ministry of my colleagues ...and my hope is that you might be helped to know about mine.

Present. #III

The format will be to share several ideas I have found helpful in my ministry; their respective sources; and something of the actual practices which have grown out of these ideas. I claim no originality. In fact, I suspect you may have heard all of this before. At the end I hope to probe a bit deeper - into theological reasons for our occasional discomfort in ministry. Finally, we will have opportunity to reflect individually, and then, in groups, on the conduct of our ministry and lives in the year ahead.

Idea number one I have called, Learning to live in the present. Its source is a little book under the title Minister on the Spot. It was written ten years ago - providentially when I needed to learn about living in the present. It's author is James Dittes who was then, and still may be, Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Religious Studies, and Professor, Psychology of Religion at Yale, and Editor of the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. I ~~have never heard of~~ Dittes ~~since — but~~ he helped me a great deal in a way which serves as a constant and helpful motif for me, particularly when the going gets tough.

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Dittes took the story of the man who had been reposing on the portico of the Pool of Bethzatha for 38 years in John 5 and suggested that he was a fair representation of a lot of clergy. The man, Dittes had the audacity to suggest, really didn't want to be healed, actually healed in the present. Without pressing the metaphor too hard, may I suggest that there is something intrinsic about our humanity which is stimulated by the eschatalogical twist to our faith, the result of which is that many of us have trouble with the present tense.....

Dittes helped me to see something at the age of 30 or so for which I am everlastingly grateful; namely that I had concluded that the kingdom of God wasn't going to come in my parish. Obviously, what I had going wasn't going to make it. But - with a little assist from the Vocations Agency, ~~which was then called Ministerial Relations, Mecca truly was High Street, Columbus~~ - I might move, and then along with a few more dollars, bigger house, I would have

the ecclesiastical resources to open the gates to the eschaton. The theme is played out in a myriad of variations....."If only I had better youth advisors the Senior High program would succeed. If only my Session members were as supportive as the Session of Tom, Dick, or Jane's church. If only my people could care." Many, if not most of us, I concluded, have heavily invested in the future's ability to bring us joy, a sense of satisfaction, completeness, or even salvation.

Dittes helped me finally to understand that those voices in the Bible which come with such stark clarity: to Moses - Elijah - Isaiah - Peter - Paul, were in all probability not very clear at all at the time; that the only certainty and clarity we may ever have is in looking backward to describe events, or looking forward with hope. The moment - the present - will probably be murky, unclear, ambiguous.

That was, and I believe it, good news. I found it liberating. I found that I took a lot less seriously the marvelous success stories I kept hearing about what someone else was doing and looked with new interest at my situation.

And as person - most of all - as person I was helped to see that it is part of my humanity which needed saving, this propensity to live so much for the future that the present moment is meaningful only insofar as it provides for, builds a better tomorrow. That's a lousy way to live: it's not a good way to be married - or to parent - or to plan one's life or to structure leisure time activities.

Idea number two is that The Ministry as Profession Is Macerating - more so, I have concluded than the profession of anyone else I know. This idea came from one of the most stimulating persons - certainly one of the most eloquent I have been privileged to know: Professor Joseph Sittler, University of Chicago. Sittler wrote an essay once - The Maceration of the Minister - which appeared in various publications. The first time I ever saw it was in a looseleaf workbook, The Church and Its Changing Ministry - and the most recent is in Grace Notes and other Fragments - a collection of essays and vignettes published on Sittler's 75th birthday. I commend it to you highly. It is refreshing, full of delights, and simply the best use of English language you are likely to read.

"To macerate" is to "chop up into small pieces", a grim but altogether accurate metaphor. The size or location of the parish doesn't matter; in fact there is a sense in which the smaller the congregation, the more macerated the minister. Our profession, alone so far as I know, demands that we be mystic, scholar, business person, counselor, manager, personnel director - all before lunchtime. And then comforter, grief therapist, conflict resolver, theologian, cheerleader, coach, song leader, and cook. It is not an unusual day when you and I do all of that. I confess I love it. The counterpoint turns me on. To go from Schoedinger's Funeral Home to the OB ward within the hour is a great, great privilege and a deep joy. But it is exhausting. And there is a real sense in which it is not possible certainly to do all of that fully and well and satifactorily.

Sittler wrote that in the classroom - and I can testify to the great distance between the rarified atmosphere of the Divinity School at Chicago and the basement of a small church in a small Northern Indiana town - "the student comes to know that the 'basileia tou theou' is a phrase of enormous scope and depth, that its study ought to persist throughout life. And then, the professor, visits the graduate on the job and sees the lines of old books on the shelves. Filed on top of these will be momentos of present concerns: a roll of blueprints; a file of negotiations between the parish, the bank and the Board of Missions; samples of asphalt tile; and a plumbers estimate." (p. 58)

The result: numbing, exhausting, life-denying maceration and a strong sense of vocational guilt.

What to do? Understand it, then decide which of these rolls define your own sense of call; get a Personnel Committee working in your church; get your people involved in clarifying what you should be doing with your time.

The third idea is that there is Rent to Be Paid in ministry. That idiom, of course, is the brainchild of James D. Glasse, former President of Lancaster Theological Seminary, United Presbyterian Pastor, in his 1972 book, Putting It Together in the Parish. Glasse simply said what most of us discover in time, namely that "most parishes want three things of their pastor. If he/she meets these minimal requirements he/she is free to do almost anything he/she wants to do. Once the rent is paid, he/she can march for peace, fly a plane, devote self to youth of the community, paint pictures, play golf - almost anything." (p. 54-55) But first - three things:

1. Preaching and worship: a service to which they are not ashamed to bring their friends.

2. Teaching and Pastoral Care (not cut rate psychotherapy): what they want to know is that their pastor cares for them and will be available when they need him/her.

3. Organization and Administration: a balanced budget, a building in reasonable repair and an organization that works.

Glass is convinced that pastors who deliver will be free - and that paying this rent is not a full time job.

We spend a lot of time complaining about the rent. The bottom line is that it isn't going to go away - or change much.

here later ⇒

The form in which the issue presents itself to most of us is, of course, the pastor/prophet dichotomy. The trouble is that we do not have the luxury of choosing to be one or the other. We must, I believe, be both. In fact, each feeds the other. We have, over the past two decades, been relentlessly urged, prodded and insulted into being prophetic. When someone among our people observes that there are other socio-political conclusions open to thoughtful Christians than the places we have come down, we have been inclined to ignore the voice as hopelessly reactionary. The result of all this is that some have pulled out all the stops, convinced that the kingdom demands a stand on the Farm Worker's boycott of Campbell Soup, and that the surest indication of faithfulness to one's calling is to have been unceremoniously fired by at least one dismayed and angry rural midwestern church. I'm confessing now. I graduated from seminary in the year of the March on Washington. I

was weaned on the assasination of three men about whom I had very deep feelings, the agonizing awareness that what we were doing in Vietnam was wrong, and the atrocity of Kent State. I felt good in the 60's when I had "let em have it on Civil Rights" in Northern Indiana.

Somehow I escaped unscathed, which is a testimony to their grace alone. Orville Gilliam, dying of cancer back down home in Portland, Tennessee, who for my benefit, tried to call Black people colored, and with whom I had deep and strong conflicts, wrote to me just last week.

I conclude that it takes courage to be prophet in these days. But it takes greater courage to be prophet and pastor - to the same people at the same time. If people know their pastor loves them, cares about them, will be attentive and available, they will allow him/her to be prophet; will, in fact, listen with earned respect; will, in fact, be nudged out of solidified positions on occasion. They will not be humiliated and insulted into anything except predictable anger.

Idea four is that Administration Is Not the Dark Side of our calling, the boring, tedious routines which are the bane of our creativity. Administration: ad - minister. It was the late Jack Meister, First Church Fort Wayne, who became head of the Council on Theological Education, who taught that one. It is ministry to enable the organism of the church to stand up, to grow, to walk. Administration is how you and I help our churches do what they want to do. "Don't put it down and don't, for Christ's sake, literally - ignore it." Meister used to say. If you believe in incarnation, if you mean it when you say "I believe in the holy catholic church" there is nothing more important than your administration. Do it with your best intelligence, be prepared for it, improve your skills, give it prime time.

Idea five: God Can Use Even a Lousy Sermon to Address His People - if the preacher invests in it: (1) time; (2) skill; (3) faith; and (4) love.

I don't presume to tell anyone how to do it. My only secrets are ones that we all know, and use with varying degrees of effectiveness. If I have anything at all to offer it is this:

1. I work ahead, I keep a book with each Sunday assigned a page. I read the texts, identify a topic - and then let it begin to ferment - and it does, like wine on a rack. They are there for me now, up till January 1, and a very fragmentary Lenten Series. But they're fermenting, and I'll pick up some stuff here and write it in for Advent or Stewardship or Epiphany.

2. I read, sometimes obsessively, always with the task of preaching in my awareness. I cannot escape it. I have finally become selective. I cannot read every word of the Reformed and Presbyterian World regardless of the intriguing titles and so I don't even try any longer. I set goals: I try, in summer, to read hard and long and good, and find that Kung - Schillebeeckx - Rollo May - will feed me all winter long like fat on a bear.

3. I am indiscriminate and promiscuous in my use of resources. We must touch base with the life people live: concerts, plays, football games, traffic jams - all get in my book.

4. I can't do it on the run, in small snatches, or under the gun. I am obsessive about a few things, but mostly about this. I have a place and a time: Tuesday morning, Capital University Library. I take a briefcase full of books and a thermos of coffee and I come out at about 1:00 p.m. with 12 legal size sheets of stuff. On Wednesday night I mark that material with a red pencil, scratching, underlining, and produce one sheet of single sentences - which easily becomes an outline. Thursday morning I write it. I simply am not "in" unless my Clerk of Session is perched on the 40th floor of the Nationwide Building calling my name. Even then I'd try to get Gerry or Barbara or Jerry to go. And then I preach it Friday morning, and I put it away till Sunday and then I preach it in the Sanctuary at 7:00 a.m. and then I edit - sometimes ruthlessly. Hemingway wrote the conclusion to Farewell to Arms 37 times. A sermon deserves at least one good laundering, I conclude.

five What Are You Doing Here on Sat AM?

Idea ~~six~~, my favorite, the one I treasure most, in its original form, was a question. The situation was this: newly ordained, serving a small church in a small Indiana town, full of Inland steelworkers, a few truck farmers, and a teacher or two; I decided that it was important to work harder than anyone else in sight. I'd let them know that being a preacher is hard going. It was a Saturday morning, early. I was behind my desk. Into the study came the husband of the treasurer to bring me my check and some muskmelons and a dozen eggs, Mike Paddock, grizzled, tough foreman in the mill. "What the hell you doin here on Saturday morning?" he asked. "You ought to be home with your family - like everybody else." "But, Mr. Paddock", I protested, "I need to be here, available, and on the job when my people are here." "Baloney!" he said. "People don't wanna see you today. They wanna go to the store, get a haircut, watch the game. Go home. They'll see you tomorrow."

I can count on one hand the Saturdays I have worked since that one, with the exception of weddings, of course, and, ironically, last Saturday when I wrote this.

Thanks to Mike I have, to the best of my ability, not asked my family to share my ministry. I was saved from a lot of nonsense because neither Sue nor I knew the first thing about the ministry nor really very much about the church. The University of Chicago, needless to say, was not aware of either - to my knowledge. So we didn't know about expectations for minister's spouses, or public behavior, or minister's children - God, I hate what we persist in doing to them. Sue typed because I didn't know how, but stopped dead in her tracks the minute it was part of anybody's expectations of her. And she has yet to hold an office in UPW, not for perjorative reasons, and she is as faithful as she choses to be and probably the best church person I know. And how she endured the sermons I used to read to her as if they were masterpieces of rhetoric and insight I'll never know, but she never once laughed.

It simply never occurred to us that anybody might think being married to a minister was a profession ipso facto. And we have never made an issue of it - and it has never been one.

I don't work Saturdays (even though I know others, for good reasons, chose to). I guard evenings much more than I used to and regret that I didn't start much earlier. It can be done - I'm convinced.

I simply refuse to miss one - time only concerts or games in which my progeny have a part if it is humanly possible. I am shameless. I will simply say, "I can only be here for 30 minutes. My son is starting at center this afternoon."

I ~~feel good about that.~~

~~Now the brief expedition deeper into the territory.~~ I conclude that the most serious detriment to our happiness, even our sanity, in ministry is the nearly pathological attachment most of us have to busyness; and conversely our refusal to stop and give time to self. I 'd like to call on Wayne Oates to help us. Oates is the distinguished Professor of Psychology of Religion at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville. Ten years ago Oates wrote a book, Confessions of a Workaholic: The Facts About Work Addiction, in which I found most of the ministers I know.

Workaholism, according to Professor Oates, is "addiction to work, the compulsion of uncontrollable need to work incessantly...It has its beginnings in childhood. It becomes acute in second and third decades of life. If it is not reversed or arrested in the forties or early fifties, it becomes chronic and may lead to death in one form or another in the late fifties and/or sixties." (p. 1)

How can you tell if you are a workaholic? AA has helped us to be sensitive to the warning signs of alcohol addiction in ourselves and those we love. What are the early signs of workaholism?

1. A workholic, in the middle of social conversation will tell how early he came to work; how late he stayed; how little sleep he's been getting, comparing himself favorably to Thomas Edison, who, everybody knows, never slept at all.

2. A workaholic, in private conversation, will compare the amount of work she is capable of producing with the paltry amount achieved by her peers. A workaholic is always busy: even at leisure she is tightly programmed and running slightly behind.

3. A workaholic can't say "no". A familiar litany is, "If I don't do this job, who will." ~~Oates observes objectively~~: "...he is likely to take on more and more over and above his prescribed activities. He is a perfectionist but he commits himself to so many people for the use of his skills that he cannot do the job well. This results in an anxiety depression amounting to panic." (p. 60)

4. A workaholic has real trouble with leisure. ~~Back in 1918 a psychoanalyst~~ by the name of Fercuczi observed "Sunday neurosis" in busy executives. By Sunday afternoon they were experiencing anxiety, physical distress, depression. A workaholic takes little if any time off, often forgoes vacation, or works while on vacation, works all day Saturday and Sunday morning, and is simply incapable of relaxing in leisure.

5. A workaholic is "other-directed", rather than "inner-directed". ~~David~~ Riesman in The Lonely Crowd, coined the phrase "other directed". It means behavior determined from outside "rather than by an autonomous self that makes decisions on the basis of a carefully developed value system." (p. 14) A workaholic doesn't have an inner life, the prerequisite for a strong sense of identity.

6. A workaholic has problems with the theology of grace, the idea of God's unearned love. He or she cannot deal with forgiveness without paying, and whenever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed simply doesn't hear the Good News. Workaholics believe they can produce everything they need, alone. If they need spiritual benefit, they'll get it by working for it; not by receiving an open-ended offer from God. Thus life is invested in building a "mighty fortress" - an impregnable bastion of security...in public esteem, in professional skill, in real estate - in money. The name of the game is working for salvation.

Those are the signs. We see all of them in some people and some of them in all. — back to my narration

The real problem with the workaholic, however, is that he or she is applauded, praised and supported by the culture. Excessive work is seen, not as a problem, but as evidence of commitment, love, loyalty, and self sacrifice. The Protestant work ethic - the drum to which most of us march - is very suspicious of idleness and the model of the successful, upwardly mobile man or worman is the one who works harder than anybody else, is at the office earliest, stays latest, and works through lunch. Organizations love workaholics. William H. Whyte, in his classic study, "The Organization Man", discovered that large organizations depend on those ascetics who will subordinate all for the organization and, of course, will pay him or her handsomely.

It is possible to laugh at most of those observations. Oates means his book to be amusing. What isn't funny at all is the price nearly everybody in medicine, psychology, religion, and management agrees we must pay for work addiction: burn out - divorce - family alienation - ulcers - alcoholism - heart attack - depression - suicide.

What I see is the guilt. We know the price we are paying personally. We see the effects in our relationships, we know what we are neglecting, the joy we are missing. The guilt itself becomes a heavy load to bear.

What is the answer? One is tempted to propose the logical antidote: rebel, revolt, react. Some do. Some must. Some sell out, cash in, retire the business attire and take up pottery in the mountains of West Virginia. That seems logical, but obviously everybody can't do that. In fact, somewhere in this exercise I want to say something in praise of hard work and in defense of self sacrifice for goals that are intrinsically worthy, such as the security and well-being of one's family, the education of one's children, the cultivation of professional skills or the planting of a straight row of corn. Working hard, by itself, is not indicative of addiction. Somewhere in this I want to testify to the grace of hard work, the fulfillment of extending oneself and

and accomplishing and completing and ending the day with a sense that some things are a little better for what one has done. I'm grateful, frankly, that there are people almost possessed with their work to find a cure for cancer. I'm glad for hard working, self sacrificing lawyers and bankers and teachers and carpenters and preachers. The solution is not laziness, unemployment, sloth.

The antidote is, first of all, the simple responsibility each of us has, regardless of age, station, or status, to assign priorities to all the demands made of us starting with our personal needs, relational needs, professional requirements, and avocational pursuits. They are not all equal. Our personal needs come first - when that list gets out of order, unhealthy things begin to happen.

The solution is, second, to come to terms with the need each of us has for an inner life. We may have buried that need. We may be frightened of the very idea. But each of us needs inner space, time, a lonely place to use Jesus' phrase. We have no authenticity, no core, no identity without that.

It is, finally, I am convinced, a theological issue. It is a matter, ultimately of coming to terms with grace - and that may mean the necessity of a conversion experience for many of us. Our addiction to work is theological. It springs from our inability to trust anybody else or conversely, from our egotism which keeps telling us that we can be self-sufficient, self-reliant, that we need nothing.

I was touched to read Professor Oates's recollection of his conversion from a lifetime of workaholism. He became aware of his addiction when his child kept reminding him how much he was missing. His awareness grew when a back problem which became worse when he overworked. The crisis came when his eldest son was in Vietnam. Oates writes: "He was a combat sailor, a machine-gunner on a small river assault boat in the Mekong Delta. And for the first time in my life I was helpless. None of my actions or work could change a thing. I found myself fallingback heavily on extra work to handle my anxiety. In the summer, my major defense was gone...I realized that I could not face it alone, but that I needed God's help and the help of all the other people I could get."

And so one man changed his way of living, and started coming home at 6:00 without exception, and became very careful about extra commitments, and began to trust that God indeed would save him, and that he didn't have to do it all alone. His testimony is that it worked and that the amount and the quality of his work has not suffered at all. And this is perhaps the worst - but also the best news of all.

The Good News of the Gospel is that in Jesus Christ God loves us. That graceful love requires no work, no merit, only our receptiveness. That grace is sufficient...it can liberate us even from our addiction to work. It frees us for full life, it frees us from all the schemes by which we try to assure our security.

We need to help one another. If the institutional church is feeding our addiction: if you are a volunteer for any reason other than that you want to be; if you are away from a family and feeling guilty - please resign. Let us help each other. Let us help each other to use the time God has given, responsibly, effectively, and gratefully. Let us support the person who decides to arrange priorities honestly, and to take time to do the important things. Let us never judge or condemn when we see it happen.

And in the midst of it all, let us covenant together to remember that our chief end, according to those wise old theologians, is not to work till we drop in our tracks, but to glorify God and enjoy him forever.